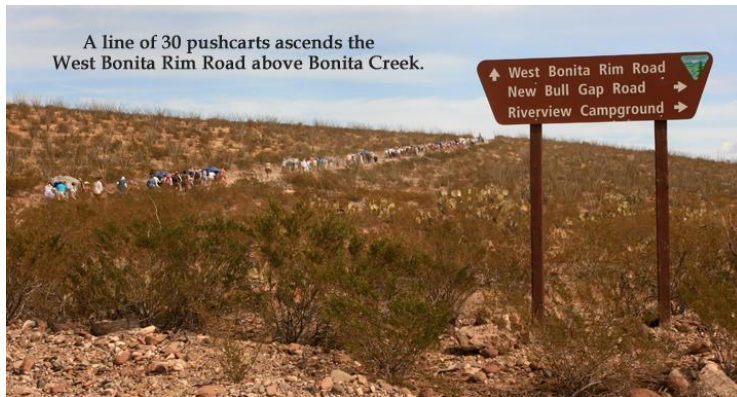


Reenactment Captures Struggles of Pioneers' Journey

Story and Photos by Diane Drobka, Safford Field Office, Arizona



Large metal wagon wheels chimed against the rocky road in the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area as modern-day pioneers climbed the steep road out of the BLM's Riverview Campground. A long line of participants, dressed in traditional attire, pushed, pulled and shouted words of encouragement as 30 handcarts meandered up the hill.

This southeastern Arizona reenactment, held every four years, is an important way of instilling a sense of pride and remembering the Mormon pioneers who made a 1,000-mile journey west to Salt Lake City in the mid-1800s. Remembering their journey, filled with challenges and sacrifice, is an important lesson for young members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The event, hosted by the Pima and Duncan stakes, also included participants from nearby Central and Ft. Thomas, as well as Cotton City, New Mexico.

The event was the result of nine months of planning requiring purchase or acquisition of everything needed for the adventure. The route chosen by organizers was rough, including rugged canyons and unstable footing, to more realistically represent the difficulty of the original trip.

On March 21, a convoy of 220 students and 60 adult leaders embarked on their three-day journey toward the Gila Valley and Safford. A horse-and-buggy medical team, as well as leaders on horseback accompanied the group.





Women pulled and men pushed as "Pa" provided encouragement.

Eight students were assigned to each pushcart, three or four pulling, two or three pushing, and another two to walk alongside and rest. These tasks were rotated throughout the trek. Two adults, known as Ma and Pa, provided support for each pushcart and assigned the day's chores. The wooden pushcarts weighed 350 pounds empty and were loaded with up to 350 pounds of supplies.

White cotton banners hung on the back of each provided the name of the family involved.

Amazingly, the pioneers covered seven miles on their first day. Ma and Pa, walking ahead of and beside the students, helped by kicking loose rocks from the route and catching those who were about to fall. As participants tired, the pace slowed on the second and third days.



To illustrate one of the challenges their ancestors' journey endured – crossing ice-cold rivers and streams – students had a chance to experience the feeling of freezing feet by putting theirs in a tub of ice water. A challenge was put forth to stay in the water as long as possible with a reward given for each three-minute interval. One three-minute session was enough for most, and some didn't make it more than a few seconds. Others took the challenge to heart, with one student toughing it out for 20 minutes.

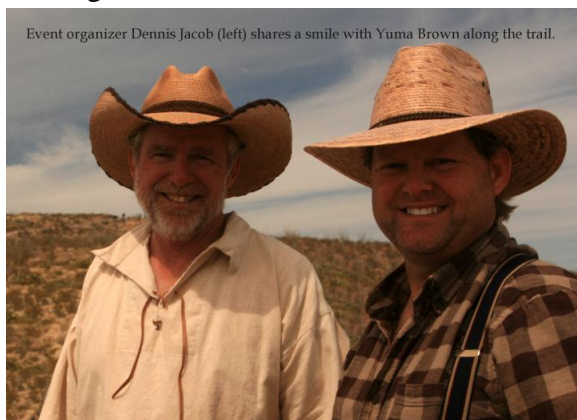


"Ma" waits as a tired pioneer rests along the route.

Another test of the pioneers' resolve was dealing with tragedies, illness and death along the way. At the beginning of one particularly bad half-mile ascent, young men were each given a card with their upcoming role. The tragedy about to unfold included rattlesnake bites, gunshot wounds, cholera, and other diseases, all resulting in the loss of their strength to assist with the family's pushcart. This initiated what was known as the Women's Pull. As the men sat quietly along the road, young women completed the half-mile switchback ascent. Despite the difficulty, many were smiling and laughing along the way.

The three-day journey ended on March 23, with all participants very tired but with a much better understanding of their ancestors' struggles in their westward journey. These young adults were much tougher than their pushcarts; several carts didn't make the entire trip due to mechanical breakdowns. A sense of accomplishment beamed from the travelers' smiles as these modern-day pioneers completed their 15-journey into the past.

The entire event took place on BLM public lands through a Special Recreation Permit issued by the Safford Field Office. "I'd like to thank whoever in the office processed our application so quickly," commented trek organizer Dennis Jacob.



And I, who accompanied the pioneers during part of their trek, was truly impressed by the organization, strength, and attitudes of all those involved.